

THE CRUELEST CUTS*Third of Six Parts*

THE HUMAN COST
OF BRINGING POULTRY
TO YOUR TABLE

MISERY ON THE LINE

Vulnerable work force suffers in silence



JOHN D. SIMMONS - jsimmons@charlotteobserver.com

Enrique Pagan was known as a tough supervisor at the House of Raeford poultry processing plant in Greenville, S.C. He says he had to push workers to keep his job. His wife, Lydia Torres, worked at the same plant but left, she said, because of carpal tunnel syndrome. Their son, Bryant, is in front.

Some managers knew workers were illegal, former employees say

BY FRANCO ORDOÑEZ, KERRY HALL
AND AMES ALEXANDER
Staff Writers

Illegal immigrants say it's easy to get a job at House of Raeford Farms.

Of 52 current and former Latino workers at House of Raeford who spoke to the Observer about their legal status, 42 said they were in the country illegally.

Company officials say they hire mostly Latino workers but don't knowingly hire illegal immigrants.

But five current and former House of Raeford supervisors and human resource administrators, including two who were involved in hiring, said some of the company's managers know they employ undocumented workers.

"If immigration came and looked at our files, they'd take half the plant," said Caitlyn Davis, a former

SEE LATINO | 10XX

A boss's view: Keep them working

BY FRANCO ORDOÑEZ, KERRY HALL
AND AMES ALEXANDER
Staff Writers

GREENVILLE, S.C. — The production lines rarely stopped.

An endless stream of raw chickens — thousands an hour — had to be sliced and cut into pieces for family dinner tables.

It was Enrique Pagan's job to keep his part of the line running.

He paced and often screamed at Mexicans and Guatemalans cutting chicken thighs. He demanded they move faster and scolded them when they left too much meat on the bone.

Pagan said most of his 90 workers in 2002 suffered hand and wrist pains. But he had production goals to meet. And he knew that workers wouldn't complain because many were in the country illegally.

"A lot of people didn't like me," he said.

Pagan (pronounced Puh-GAHN) had been hired in 1999 and promoted to supervisor about a year later when House of Raeford Farms' work force was in transition. By the early 2000s, Latinos had replaced most African Americans on production lines. The company needed supervisors who could lead and speak Spanish. Pagan could do both.

He described himself as a loyal employee, but he would come to question company tactics. He would confront both the pressure for profits in the billion-dollar poultry industry, and the suffering that resulted.

He said his bosses never told him to intimidate his fellow Latino workers but never reprimanded him for doing so. He says he didn't have a choice — his job was at stake.

SEE PAGAN | 11XX